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The professionalization of teaching: is it truly much ado about nothing?

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THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TEACHING

Is it Truly Much Ado About Nothing?

Robert P. Engvall

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This introduction provides background information about the proliferation of school reform discussion that has resulted in, among other things, serious concerns about the quality and competency of teachers. The effectiveness of teachers has long been a public concern, but there has been an equally long reluctance to view teaching as a profession. Ultimately with a better understanding of teachers and their demands, might come positive reform or, at least, more skepticism toward uncertain reform proposals. Thomas Sowell (1995) writes about "prevailing vision" -- which he defines as the assumptions that many persons take for granted to such an extent, that the assumptions themselves are not generally confronted with demands for empirical evidence (p. 2). Schools and the teachers within them are often taken for granted to such an extent that assumptions about them and the work they do are often immune from evidentiary examinations.

"Teaching is a complex act, influenced by subtle conditions and swift teacher-student interactions" (Ornstein, 1995, p. 124). "Throughout the new paradigm on teaching, the centrality and wisdom of the teacher is reaffirmed, which is welcome and proper" (Ornstein, 1995, p. 128). If this is truly the new paradigm on teaching, challenging many of the assumptions that the public has about teachers and schools is of paramount importance.

The Professionalization of Teaching

Our collective view of unions has become increasingly negative and teachers' unions have suffered from this "prevailing vision." When we think of unions within the schools, we often think of organizations out to protect less than stellar teachers, and/or organizations out to raise our taxes in order to fund teacher salary increases. The positive impact of unionization is often, if not usually, overlooked. While it is difficult to argue against the merit of dismissing poor and ineffective teachers, it is equally difficult to argue with the mandates of due process and deliberate review.

School districts considering dismissal of a teacher should carefully review whatever procedures are contained within their personnel policies to make certain those procedures are followed. The issues of academic freedom, substantive and procedural due process, as well as any protected interests that may be violated, all need to be considered prior to making decisions about teacher dismissal.

"The citizen should become more informed on the operation of trade unions and collective bargaining. Since he or she will determine the ultimate status of unions, judgment as to their merits should be based on accurate information and sound analysis" (Taylor & Witney, 1992, p. 425). Taxpayers generally should find value in an assessment of the role of unionism in education in order to gain more understanding of the actual costs of teacher unionism. Parents should gain through better knowledge of what is expected legally and practically of their children's teachers. Further and most importantly, research has concluded that a teacher's faith in his or her ability to make a difference in a student does impact student achievement (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Glatthorn, 1992; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993). Such faith is often a product of the environment in the school. An efficacious teacher believes that he or she has the power and ability to produce a desired effect (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993). Several factors make it difficult for teachers to possess this sense of efficacy including: low pay, public criticism, limited collegial interaction, and the teachers' relative powerlessness within the organizational structure of the school (Glatthorn, 1992). The challenge for educators and for education is to find incentives that do not divide but instead bring about a collaborative search for better ways of coping with an extremely difficult set of problems (Bok, 1993).

Thus far, as this work considers more fully later, there has been an inability on the part of researchers to actually tie together collective

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bargaining with an improvement in student outcomes. By deduction, if it can be established that teachers' faith in their ability to make a difference improves student outcomes and teachers' "power," and that because of that their faith in their ability to make a difference within the structure of the larger school bureaucracy increases through their unionism and collective bargaining, then it may be possible to deduce that collective bargaining has a positive impact upon student outcomes.

For students of administration, there can be tremendous value in gaining a greater understanding of the profession generally, as it is, and as it might evolve. Such a greater understanding may be useful in assisting in some of the "subparts" of educational administration such as collective bargaining, professional ethics, and problem-solving within the schools on many levels. To study teachers, not by what they teach, but by what the "realities of teaching" are, and the level of "professionalism" that they have attained, administrators should be helped to better serve their staffs and ultimately improve the "atmosphere" to better promote higher levels of teaching and ultimately, higher levels of learning and consequently higher levels of community satisfaction. To complete the circle, such promotion of higher levels of community satisfaction might tend to improve community involvement and support of the public schools, which in turn would benefit all members of the school community, the administration, the teachers, and most importantly, the students.

The public's declining confidence in its schools has likely been the most significant reason for the voluminous literature concerning the issue of "school reform." For the purposes of this work, "school reform" refers to the overbroad, overvague concept of changing the present state of the schools. Teachers have allowed (probably through little fault of their own) "school reform" discussion to permeate the culture and climate surrounding the public schools. Within such a climate, it is easy to understand that organizations existing within that culture, such as teachers' unions, will undergo tremendous scrutiny and criticism, some fair, and some unfair. Whatever successes "unions" may have had in improving schools, the educational and mainstream press typically correlate union presence with labor conflict.

The aspiration to reform schools has been a recurrent theme in American education (Eisner, 1992). Retaining, or in some cases restoring, the public confidence in the schools is "essential for the continuation of the educational enterprise" (Wiles & Bondi, 1985, p. 215). Since the early 1980's, there have been numerous reports done by

several persons and commissions all on the topic of "school reform" (see, for example, Adler, 1982; Boyer, 1983; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Goodlad, 1984; The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983;Sizer, 1984).

For whatever reasons, taxes that go to social services such as "education" generally, and teachers' salaries specifically, are seen as more onerous than ever, and taxpayer revolt is becoming more and more common. The fact that fewer and fewer taxpayers have children in school and the increasing gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" are critical factors that have led to the erosion of widespread public acceptance of public education. A congressional study released in March 1989 shows that the average family income of the poorest fifth of the population declined by over 6 percent from 1979 through 1987, while the richest fifth saw their average family income rise by 11 percent (Chomsky, 1991). These tremendous and growing disparities between rich and poor make for an environment in which those at the top who control more and more wealth have little real stake in America's public educational system (Chomsky, 1991).

In this study the reform movement and its literature are seen through the lens of labor relations. A few others (notably Kerchner & Caufman, 1993) have attempted to put forth their own agenda for change (collaborative labor relations) through refocusing and redefining traditional perceptions about conflict-oriented labor relations. Kerchner & Caufman (1993) estimate that "collaborative labor relations" have been attempted in hundreds of school districts within the United States. Bascia (1994) also ably considers the impact of unions in the professional lives of teachers. This work attempts to put forth the proposition that rather than cloaking themselves in the "cover" of professionalism, teachers' associations would be better served by less argument over words and concepts, and more attention to the present realities of teaching.

The wealth of reform literature indicates, among other things, that schools no longer enjoy the community's unconditional trust and are frequently challenged to defend, in court and in the public debate, the decisions and actions of their boards and administrators. The extent to which education is genuinely valued in our society has often been called into question (Gardner, 1991). "The educational enterprise continues to be devalued by our society, our academic institutions, and even by us...part of the problem is caused by the simplistic way we think about

it" (Weimer, 1993, p. 2).

How can something so central to the mission of our institution, so intrinsically a part of the advancement of knowledge be given such short shrift? The answer is complicated, but I am firmly convinced that the lack of reward and recognition in part results from the simplistic, nonreflective, and uninformed ways many in our profession think about teaching. Approaching the teaching-learning enterprise in more intellectually robust ways puts you on the side of those of us committed to being part of the solution (Weimer, 1993, p. 124).

Faced with society's doubts about the public schools and the competence of those within the schools, administrators and boards have faced additional pressure to dismiss certain teachers. Within an evermore litigious society (Dunklee & Shoop, 1993), teachers, like other citizens, are increasing their willingness to question the decisions made by their employers when they feel that circumstances warrant such a challenge. Times like these require great vigilance to protect people's careers against any rush to action based on unstated values and presumptions rather than facts. "Fairness as well as effectiveness require that values be made explicit and that fact rather than assumptions be the basis for assessing blame for deficiencies in education and formulating solutions" (Gross, 1988, p. 2).

The increased "educational" litigation has heightened the need for legal assistance on the part of school districts and educators themselves. The fact that litigation is expensive, both in terms of dollars and time, is ample reason to avoid it at all cost. Beyond the expense, the publicity that school districts receive when they litigate against former employees is not usually favorable. Despite such knowledge, litigation does occur.